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House of Representatives

The House met at noon and was called to order by the Speaker pro tempore (Mr. DENHAM).

DESIGNATION OF SPEAKER PRO TEMPORE

The SPEAKER pro tempore laid before the House the following communication from the Speaker:

WASHINGTON, DC,
February 24, 2015.

I hereby appoint the Honorable JEFF DENHAM to act as Speaker pro tempore on this day.

JOHN A. BOEHNER,
Speaker of the House of Representatives.

MORNING-HOUR DEBATE

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the order of the House of January 6, 2015, the Chair will now recognize Members from lists submitted by the majority and minority leaders for morning-hour debate.

The Chair will alternate recognition between the parties, with each party limited to 1 hour and each Member other than the majority and minority leaders and the minority whip limited to 5 minutes, but in no event shall debate continue beyond 1:50 p.m.

CONGRESS OF CLIFFS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Oregon (Mr. BLUMENAUER) for 5 minutes.

Mr. BLUMENAUER. Mr. Speaker, there is a lot of talk of cliffs here in our Nation's Capital. We have fiscal cliffs that we faced with the debt ceiling. There was the sequestration cliff. We had, obviously, the cliffs surrounding the government shutdown.

This week, we face a Homeland Security cliff. Because our Republican friends have been unable to reach agreement and have held hostage the

budget of the Department of Homeland Security, we face a situation where we will either shut down those operations or, hopefully, people will come to their senses and take action. But, again, it is government by cliff.

In March, we are facing the SGR cliff. If the government doesn't move forward to deal with a meaningful solution to the sustainable growth rate, we are going to see a dramatic reduction in government reimbursement under Medicare to providers.

And looming in the background—something that we talked about last summer because Congress refused to deal meaningfully with transportation funding—there will be another cliff May 31 as the transportation fund loses its ability to fund. Already, there are programs around the country in local and State government that are trying to factor in reductions of important construction work that they aren't certain they can do this summer.

Well, we are putting in the background another cliff. It is one that will probably not get the attention that it deserves, but one that deserves people to focus on because it will impact 11 million of our most vulnerable citizens.

Over the course of the years, there have been opportunities within the trust fund that funds retirement and disability, which are basically, for most people, synonymous—they are paid for by the same tax on our earnings and that our employers pay, but they have been segregated into two accounts, one dealing with disability and one dealing with retirement.

Over the history of these two programs they have spent at different rates. Eleven times in the past, under Republican and Democratic Presidents alike, Congress has moved to shift money from one trust fund to another to be able to even it out and not run out of the ability to pay benefits. The last adjustment was made in 1994, but the disability account was only adjusted for about 20 years.

At the time, it was understood that there would be a need for more action dealing with disability because of a very fundamental demographic change: we have a lot more women in the workforce and the baby boom generation is moving into the years in their careers where they are more prone to disability claims. And, sure enough, that projection is right. Around December of next year, we will no longer be able to pay full disability payments unless there is an adjustment.

Well, the fix that has been done 11 times over the years, on a bipartisan basis, has been made infinitely more difficult because of a rule change that our friends on the Republican side have adopted for this Congress. Under what they have approved, it will be impossible to make that simple adjustment that we have done time and time again if a single Member of the House of Representatives objects.

This is setting up an artificial crisis. There is a need to adjust funding for both Social Security and disability because, combined, in about 2033 or 2034 they will not be able to pay out full benefits. That is why it is important for Congress to be able to step forward and deal with it meaningfully, but it is not something you do in a crisis, and it is not something that should be done by picking out the one area in which 11 million citizens rely on these for disability payments. It should be done thoughtfully and carefully.

If people are concerned about fraud and misuse, I would suggest that my Republican friends look at what they did in the budget process. Over the last 3 years, they have cut 7 percent out of the budget for the Social Security Administration that could have gone to deal with enforcement and that could have gone to deal with fraud and abuse. It could have gone to make sure that the program is operating properly.

Instead, we have set up a crisis to try and force reductions in benefits for

□ This symbol represents the time of day during the House proceedings, e.g., □ 1407 is 2:07 p.m.

Matter set in this typeface indicates words inserted or appended, rather than spoken, by a Member of the House on the floor.



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